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# FOREIGN SERVICE DESPATCH

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SUBJECT: Sabena Air Crash - Identification of Victims.

As the Department is no doubt aware, the FBI Disaster Squad, headed by Mr. C. Lester TROTTER, Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, completed its task on February 24, 1961 and left Brussels the same evening.

Their assistance proved invaluable as the Belgian authorities had been unable, on the basis of the information available to them, to identify positively the last 24 American victims and one Canadian. On the basis of fingerprint charts, dental charts, and other identifying data, brought with them and received from the United States after their arrival, the FBI team was able to provide the Belgian authorities with sufficient data to enable the Belgian authorities to clear up all the doubtful cases. In view of certain criticism of the FBI which appeared in the local press, it is being deemed appropriate to provide the Department with an excerpt, (in translation) of a long article on the Sabena air crash which appeared in Le Soir, a Belgian daily newspaper, in its issue of February 2 1961 under the heading "Defect in the Electrical Control Equipment in the Rear?" (enclosure no. 1). The article is signed by Huges Vehenne. This article contains a brutal and unjust attack on the FBI and the Belgian police authorities in charge of the investigation. Mr. Trotter refused to be upset, but M. Raymond CHARLES, the Procureur du Roi, who was in charge of the investigation, was incensed and immediately convoked a press conference. His statements and comments thereon were duly published in Le Soir in its issue of February 25, 1961 under the heading "All the Victims Have Been Identified" which was signed by one R. Fuss. A full translation is enclosed (enclosure no. 2). Notwithstanding the complete vindication by Mr. Fuss, the writer of the first article, Mr. Vehenne, contributed a second long article on the Sabena air crash under the heading "Icing Up, Condensation?", in the same issue and on the same page, wherein he retracted, with tongue in

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cheek, the aspersions which he had cast on the FBI in his original article, but continued to express some cynicism with respect to the entire operation. A translation of the pertinent portion of the second article is enclosed for the Department's information (enclosure no. 3).

Suffice to state that, without the FBI, the Belgian authorities might have been hard put to have completed their identification of the American victims. The contribution of the FBI team was acclaimed not only in public but in private by Mr. Raymond Charles, who gave a reception for the FBI team at which he expressed his sincere thanks for their assistance. It is the Embassy's opinion that due credit should be given to both the FBI and the Belgian police authorities for their tact, patience and understanding, as well as to the members of the United States Army Quartermaster Mortuary System, Europe, at Frankfurt, headed by Captain Robert H. BATES, whose offer to assist was communicated to and duly accepted by Mr. Raymond Charles, Procureur du Roi. It is understood that the services of Mr. Wesley A. NEEP, a dental technician attached to the Frankfurt Mortuary Center, were of great value and were deeply appreciated by all concerned. In addition, the Belgian authorities were ably assisted by a German radiologist, Dr. NEISS, from Erlangen University, who was successful in establishing the age of many of the victims.

In extending credit for services rendered the American victims, the Embassy desires to bring to the particular attention of the Department the extraordinary services and assistance rendered by Sabena officials, both here and in New York. They were of special assistance to the FBI team and to the Belgian authorities in obtaining for and transmitting to the FBI team in Brussels identifying information on the American victims with promptness and dispatch.

For the Chargé d'Affaires a.i.:

Basil F. Macgowan
Second Secretary
of Embassy

Enclosures:

1. Excerpt of article in Le Soir dated February 23, 1961.
2. Translation of article by R. Fuss in Le Soir February 25, 1961.
3. Excerpt of article by H. Vehenne in Le Soir February 25, 1961.

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TRANSLATION

Excerpt from Le Soir, published in Brussels, Belgium, February 23, 1961.

IMPETUOUS F.B.I.

The inquest was marked by a variety of incidents. For that reason, many persons in judicial, and more particularly in aeronautical circles, are severely judging the brutal, imperious, and even unrealistic way in which the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of Washington, in Brussels to investigate the catastrophe, have acted. It is regretted, also, that the Belgian authorities have permitted them to act. These gentlemen are absolutely convinced of the criminal act of a passenger wishing to (or not wishing to) go behind the iron curtain, and who must have shot the recalcitrant pilots, risking his own life!

That is why, even though the bodies were already in their coffins, the F.B.I. demanded -- and obtained -- new autopsies! What good are our medical-legal experts and our magistrates? That's not all: these truly extraordinary agents also demanded that the fingerprints be taken of all the victims. One may imagine what this research was like, how macabre the dispute over their usefulness, especially when one knows how minute are the formalities to which American citizens are subjected when leaving the United States to travel behind the iron curtain. In this case, a skating team going to Prague was involved ...

Such is the news of the day concerning the air catastrophe at Berg.

TRANSLATION

Source: Le Soir, published in Brussels, Belgium, issue of February 25, 1961.

## ALL THE VICTIMS HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED

Thursday, by the end of the forenoon, the four agents of the identification services of the American Bureau of Federal Investigations in Washington, had terminated the very difficult task which they had to accomplish. They have succeeded in identifying the bodies of the 24 American citizens and of the Canadian, victims of the crash. They were in possession of a series of data which the Belgian investigators did not have at their disposal, inasmuch as they brought with them documents pertaining to the fingerprints, the dental condition and the bone structure of the greater part of their co-citizens.

### A welcome proposal

It was a few hours after the crash that the Consul of the United States made a proposal to Mr. Raymond Charles, Procureur du Roi in Brussels, offering the assistance of personnel specialized in the identification of charred or badly injured bodies. The Procureur du Roi has pointed out that he welcomed this offer from the representative of the United States, who specified that his co-citizens did have no intention whatsoever to interfere with the inquest itself. This was repeated by the chief of the American police officers at the time when they arrived in Brussels under the command of Mr. Trotter, Assistant Director of the Identification Section of the F.B.I. He was accompanied by three of his agents and was soon joined here by two American militaries, one coming from occupied Germany and the other from France. Those two specialists, one of whom is particularly conversant in anthropology and the other in dentistry, have worked since 1952 at identifying the bodies of unknown American soldiers who have been buried in different cemeteries in Europe.

At the time of their arrival, all the Belgian and European victims had been identified by the experts and the Belgian police authorities. The same was true for the 24 American citizens. The specialists from Washington remained unremittingly at their task, which was practically terminated Thursday at noon. Only two more bodies retained the care of the federal agents. One of them had not yet been formally identified but only one small verification was needed to dispel all doubts, after which the last one would no longer present any problems.

The police magistrate, the experts...the police authorities and the legists-physicians do not stop praising the efficacy of the assistance which was rendered them by the American technicians.

Purely technical assistance

Mr. Raymond Charles has further specified that the Americans have not interfered at all with the inquest. They did not even visit the place of the accident; they have not seen the carlingue of the plane nor any of the documents in the dossier which has been prepared by the Belgian authorities. They have played the part of "laboratory technicians" and nothing else. They will leave Belgium by plane, today Friday, at 6 p.m.

THE OUTCOME OF THE AUTOPSIES

The definite outcome of the autopsies ordered by Judge Ooms has not yet been known for all the cases. Particularly, the bodies of the two pilots have been examinied with the utmost care, in order to establish whether they might have been killed by a fire arm, by poison or by asphyxiation. There is no trace of a shot wound or of any poison. The blood test is not yet terminated but everything leads to believe that the pilots were alive at the time when the plane violently hit the ground.

As soon as we shall have a serious basis for making any declarations to the press, we shall not fail to do so, has further declared the Procureur du Roi, who hopes to be able to see the press next week. He is indeed well aware of the interest of the public in this crash.

Fanciful rumors

It has been stated in certain circles that the Belgian legal authorities have worked under American orders. This is completely inaccurate. The representatives of the firm which has built the damaged plane, have been steadfastly kept away from the place of the accident, when they tried to establish their right to participate in the inquest. They were authorized to see the damaged plane but they could not take anything away and they have not yet been authorized to touch anything. Only the police magistrate, the Procureur du Roi and their experts have led the inquest. The legal circles have remained in continual contact with the specialized representatives of the flying personnel of the air company and of the administration and nothing has been hidden, concludes Mr. Raymond Charles.

R. FUSS

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EXCERPT IN TRANSLATION

Source: Le Soir, published in Brussels, Belgium, issue of February 25, 1961.

AGAIN THE F.B.I.

It appears that our information concerning the attitude of the "impetuous F.B.I." have grieved certain magistrates and officers of the judicial police authorities in the Prosecutor's Office in Brussels who thought that they should perceive in the comments made on the methods of these American police authorities, an indirect cirticism of their actions. We will admit frankly that we have never thought of attributing to them any complaisance or docility. It remains true however, that these American policemen have demanded the opening of two coffins: those of the pilots.

The explanation which is given to this new investigation may justify its usefulness, except, of course, in connection with the regard for public opinion. Indeed, the American policemen wished to verify the following supposition: sudden death or brutal incapacity of the two pilots, wounded at the head by the explosion of a bottle of oxygen placed in the cockpit. This verification has been negative.

We have also spoken about an operation for the taking of fingerprints. The initiative was taken, not by the American policemen, but by the judicial police with the Prosecutor's Office in Brussels; and it is not up to us to judge of its pertinency on a technical basis. We had, indeed, only considered the sadly gloomy aspect of this investigation. The American policemen have only requested that new prints be taken. One should give to Caesar....

It has been further reported to us that these foreigners have shown a remarkable competence and calm. Here also, we shall leave this appreciation to their Belgian colleagues. As it can be seen, the discussion only concerned shades of meaning. Anybody will choose the one he prefers.

H. VEHENNE

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